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ABSTRACT

A program for teaching poetry was administered to 82 working class children, testing the suggestion that improved ability in writing poetry would result in improvement in their attitude towards literature in general, and in their ability to write prose. Although limited by the small number of intact groups and possible questions on the validity of the attitude scales, the study concludes that the poetry instruction had beneficial side effects in the suggested areas. (DLG)

POETRY INSTRUCTION: ITS EFFECT ON ATTITUDES TOWARD LITERATURE AND THE ABILITY TO WRITE PROSE

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Introduction

As a result of previous research (Shapiro & Shapiro; 1971 a., 1971 b.) it was shown that fourth and fifth graders from both middle and lower class backgrounds as defined by Mayer(1955) and with varying degrees of intelligence, creativity and language achievement could be taught to express themselves poetically. It was suggested (Shapiro & Shapiro, 1971 a.) that perhaps as youngsters began to improve in their ability to write poetry, this improvement would result in improvement in attitude towards literature in general and in their ability to write prose. Therefore, the present study was undertaken in an attempt to investigate these latter issues.

Procedures

Subject Sample

S's were the 82 children (42 boys, 40 girls) in the four fourth grade classes of two metropolitan elementary schools, virtually all of the children being from working class

backgrounds as defined by Mayer(1955); that is, their parents were skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers. All four teachers in the classes volunteered to participate in the study and whole classes were randomly assigned, two to the experimental and two to the control group.

Treatment

In the experimental group a previously developed program for teaching poetry to children (Shapiro & Shapiro,1971b.) was used. These poetry lessons (1) consisted of fifteen half-hour lessons given over a period of six weeks, (2) provided six occasions during this time for the youngsters to write original poems, and (3) were organized around the themes of unity, choice of words, rhythm, imagery and affective quality; elements considered essential in a good poem (Walter, 1962). The lessons themselves consisted of a sequence of carefully planned group and individual activities designed to (a) increase children's facility with words, (b) help children to express their ideas in new ways, and (c) lead the children to think of questions related to the quality of good poetry. Despite this strong structural thread, the lessons are 'semi-structured' in that an attempt is made to use the device of multiple grouping within the class to provide the youngsters with opportunities for self-expression and the interaction available in small group brainstorming and the sharing of original ideas. The children were also given the opportunity to listen to poetry read by the teacher; poems written especially for children and poetry written by children.

The time for the poetry lessons was taken from the regular language arts period. The control group continued with the standard fourth grade language arts program which was organized around the Roberts Series (Roberts, 1966) and which was changed only to provide these children with the same number of writing opportunities as those in the experimental group.

Measuring Instruments

A special rating scale, previously developed by the investigators (Shapiro, Crossley & Shapiro, 1969), was used to evaluate the effect of the lessons on the subjects' ability to write poetry. The rating form provided for an independent rating along a four point scale for each of the dimensions (i.e., unity, choice of words, rhythm, imagery, and affective quality) assessed, and a twenty-point overall rating was derived by summing across the five sub-scales. Both a pretest and a posttest poem were collected, transcribed by the investigators correcting only spelling and punctuation errors. The poems were coded by number so as not to indicate the S's identity or whether they were pre- or post samples. Three raters (all of whom were English majors and elementary school teachers) rated all the poems. The average of the three ratings was used, and the inter-judge reliability of the overall rating was +.89.

In order to evaluate the prose, a rating scale was constructed by the investigators based on an adaptation of two previously developed sets of criteria for composition

(Greene & Petty, 1971; Knapp, 1968). The criteria consisted of (a) unity of thought; (b) organization/fluency; (c) originality/imagination; (d) opening/closing sentences; and (e) emotional appeal. Both a pretest and posttest composition were collected and rated using the same procedures as in the poems. The inter-judge reliability of the overall composition rating was +.84 for the average rating based on three independent judgements.

Attitudes toward literature were measured by a semantic differential rating of three concepts (reading, writing a story, and poetry) along four bi-polar scales selected for their high loadings on the evaluative factor (Osgood, 1964). Both a pretest and a posttest were administered and the test-retest reliability of the scale was +.79.

Three additional independent variables were introduced as appropriate control measures. These were (a) intelligence, measured by the Pintner-Durost Elementary Test (Pintner et al, 1941), (b) language achievement, measured by the word knowledge sub-test of the elementary and intermediate battery of the Metropolitan Achievement Tests, Form A (Durost et al, 1960) and (c) reading, measured by the reading sub-test of the elementary and intermediate battery of the Metropolitan Achievement Tests, Form A (Durost et al, 1960).

Results

The general research question asked was: What was the effect of a series of poetry lessons on children's (a) ability to write poetry; (b) ability to write prose and (c) change in

attitude towards literature? The results are reported in terms of pre-posttest gains within the treatment groups and the relative gains between them.

(a) Within Groups

The pre- and posttest means for the experimental and control groups are presented in Table 1. As can be seen

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Insert Table 1 about here

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from this data both groups made a statistically significant gain (alpha = .01) in their ability to write both poetry and prose. Along the 20 point writing scales the mean gain for the experimental group was 10.1 for poetry and 8.7 for prose while the corresponding figures for the control group were 1.2 and 2.0 respectively. It is suggested that the small but statistically significant improvement in the children's ability in the control group might well have been due to the practice effect of the special writing assignments introduced during the treatment period. However, the change to a more positive attitude towards literature occurred only in the experimental group where the mean gains were 4 to 5 points on the individual subscales. In fact, in this latter respect the control group showed a slight but non-significant decline, i.e., a worsening of attitude over the treatment period.

(b) Between Groups

Since intact groups were assigned to treatments, i.e., the fact that whole classes rather than individual students were randomly assigned, pre-experimental sampling equivalence could not be assumed. Therefore, analyses of covariance were used to assess the relative effect of the treatments as between the control and experimental groups. Two-way analyses were completed, assessing the main and interaction effects of treatment and sex and adjusting the posttest scores for pre-experimental differences in the corresponding pretest, IQ, reading achievement, language achievement, and literary attitudes. Table 2 summarizes the results in presenting the posttest adjusted means for the main effects and their corresponding F ratios. Tables 3-8 present the individual source tables for these analyses.

Insert Tables 2-8 about here

These analyses revealed a statistically significant (alpha = .01) treatment effect favoring the experimental group on the two writing scales (c.f. Tables 3 & 4) and on the four attitudinal scales (c.f. Tables 5-8). As shown in Table 2, the differences on the 20 point scales in the posttest adjusted means between the experimental and control groups in poetry (8.8), prose (7.6), attitudes toward reading (4.3), writing a story (5.4), and poetry (5.3) were substantial as well as statistically significant. These findings seem to

indicate that the poetry lessons had a positive effect on all of these variables.

There were no statistically significant differences between the sexes save for the attitude scales towards poetry and overall literary expression(cf. Tables 7 & 8) on which the girls responded more favorably than the boys. As shown in Table 2, the girls had a more favorable attitude towards poetry than the boys, the means being 14.0 and 11.8 respecitvely, while the corresponding figures for the overall scale were 43.1 and 39.5. This might be partially due to the age/grade level (Torrance, 1955) where it is more fashionable for the female sex to like poetry than the male. There were no statistically significant interactions between treatment and sex in terms of any of the dependent variables.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of this study among which are (a) its restriction to a small number of intact groups, and (b) possible questions concerning the validity of the attitude scales, the data suggest that for fourth grade children from working class backgrounds, the introduction of instruction in poetry into the language arts curriculum has beneficial side effects in terms of the youngsters' ability to write prose and their more positive attitude toward literature in general. Although it is true that simple practice provided writing gains in both poetry and prose for the control group, these were unsubstantial when compare to those of the experimental subjects, and further, the attitudes

of the control subjects were either stationary or worsening while those of the experimental group showed a marked improvement.

Seen as important in the results favoring the experimental group were two factors: (a) the inherent qualities of poetry in terms of the unconventional freedom and scope it provides for linguistic expression, and (b) the general provision for the young school child of an alternative mode for self-expression through language.

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Table 1

Pretest and Posttest Means

Measure	Group					
	Experimental (N=36)			Control (N=46)		
	Pretest	Posttest	$F_{1,35}$	Pretest	Posttest	$F_{1,45}$
IQ	103.7	-	-	102.5	-	-
Reading	3.7	-	-	3.6	-	-
Language	4.0	-	-	3.9	-	-
Poetry	3.6 (4.4) a.	13.7 (5.2)	99.1**	3.8 (4.5)	5.0 (3.8)	16.7**
Prose	6.6 (4.4)	14.3 (2.6)	94.8**	6.8 (3.8)	8.8 (3.1)	41.8**
Literary Attitudes						
Reading	12.5 (3.5)	16.5 (3.2)	35.9**	12.3 (3.2)	12.1 (3.4)	.2
Writing A Story	11.8 (4.0)	16.7 (3.0)	47.7**	11.7 (3.5)	11.2 (3.1)	1.9
Poetry	11.4 (4.5)	15.5 (4.6)	39.4**	11.3 (4.0)	10.2 (3.5)	.4
Overall	35.6 (10.6)	48.7 (8.9)	63.3**	35.2 (9.4)	33.6 (8.2)	.1

a. Figures in parentheses are the standard deviations
** Statistically significant at the one percent level

Table 2

Analysis of Covariance: Posttest Adjusted Means

Posttest Measure	Grouping: Treatment			Grouping: Sex		
	Exp. (N=36)	Control (N=46)	F1,73	Males (N=42)	Females (N=40)	F1,73
Poetry	13.8	5.0	144.1**	9.1	9.7	.3
Prose	14.3	8.7	108.8**	11.1	11.9	2.8
Literary Attitudes						
Reading	16.5	12.2	46.4**	14.1	14.7	.9
Writing A Story	16.7	11.3	89.1**	13.6	14.4	2.3
Poetry	15.5	10.2	68.7**	11.8	14.0	10.6**
Overall	48.7	32.7	114.8**	39.5	43.1	6.9*

a. Adjusted for pre-experimental differences in corresponding pretest, IQ, reading achievement, language achievement, and literary attitudes.

** Statistically significant at the one percent level
* Statistically significant at the five percent level

Table 3

Analysis of Covariance: Posttest Poem Ratings

Source	df	Mean Square	F
Treatment	1	154657.56	144.14 **
Sex	1	321.50	.30
Treatment x Sex	1	2518.69	2.35
Error	73	1072.96	-

** Statistically significant at the one percent level

Table 4

Analysis of Covariance: Posttest Prose Ratings

Source	df	Mean Square	F
Treatment	1	62195.86	108.85 **
Sex	1	1574.74	2.76
Treatment x Sex	1	1056.99	1.85
Error	73	571.41	-

** Statistically significant at the one percent level

Table 5

Analysis of Covariance: Posttest Reading Attitude Ratings

Source	df	Mean Square	F
Treatment	1	364.93	46.41 **
Sex	1	6.71	.85
Treatment x Sex	1	.55	.07
Error	73	7.86	

** Statistically significant at the one percent level

Table 6

Analysis of Covariance: Posttest Writing a Story Attitude Ratings

Source	df	Mean Square	F
Treatment	1	580.04	89.15 **
Sex	1	14.70	2.26
Treatment x Sex	1	1.48	.23
Error	73	6.51	

** Statistically significant at the one percent level

Table 7

Analysis of Covariance: Posttest Poetry Attitude Ratings

Source	df	Mean Square	F
Treatment	1	546.87	68.69 **
Sex	1	84.60	10.63 **
Treatment x Sex	1	12.28	1.54
Error	73	7.96	

** Statistically significant at the one percent level

Table 8

Analysis of Covariance: Posttest Overall Attitude Ratings

Source	df	Mean Square	F
Treatment	1	4386.21	114.81 **
Sex	1	261.92	6.86 *
Treatment x Sex	1	3.69	.10
Error	73	38.20	

** Statistically significant at the one percent level
* Statistically significant at the five percent level